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Teacher Care, a Fulcrum for Excellent and Equitable Education and Society or As Goes Teacher Care, So Goes Society

Abstract

Educational reforms come and go; teachers transcend. Teachers shape lives in whatever context they live. The teacher is the one constant, necessary but not sufficient element in the educational process. For teachers to deliver excellent performance, with equity, in the classroom, they must receive sufficient, excellent treatment with equity in their roles in society. They cannot be expected to give what they do not receive. Some countries highly esteem their teachers, with salaries and opportunities to match, for example, Singapore and Finland. The outcomes are observed in the quality of life in those societies. These concepts can apply to any culture, as we are speaking of basic, universal needs and reactions of human beings. The perspective of this study is local, yet global, in that we study individual countries' situations, touching on their social, economic, and educational aspects, but keeping in mind the commonalities of human nature globally. The aim of this paper is to prove that kind and caring action, beginning with teachers and the education system will result in an upward cycle of more such actions throughout society. Methodological approach is mixed. Qualitative research draws on secondary data in the form of a literature review of two case studies: Singapore and Finland. Quantitative data from the educational systems of both case study countries informs the analysis. The significance of this study is the potential societal paradigm shift which could come about by moving the pivotal fulcrum of socioeconomic balance even slightly in favor of our teachers.

Keywords: teacher, care, training, profession, society, equity, recognition, compensation

Introduction

The teacher is the one constant, necessary but not sufficient element in the educational process. For teachers to deliver excellent performance, with equity, in the classroom, they must receive sufficient, excellent treatment with equity in their roles in society. Taking it a step further, even the good and well cared for teacher element is necessary, but not sufficient to provide excellent and equitable education opportunities for students. Society must be excellent and equitable. Everyday life outside the classroom teaches much more profoundly than any classroom lecture. Policies that help the underprivileged show our youth that people matter. The possibility that our future national and global policy makers will be ethically and intellectually equipped to make good decisions concerning equity in their societies and globally, depends upon the quality of education they receive from the well-cared-for teachers of today in a society that provides equitable opportunity to all. This is not the picture of our world today. At some point, there must be a bend in the road for there to be a change of direction. The prioritization of the care of our teachers now may be that point.

The hypothesis of this paper is: Kind and caring action, injected into the system of this world at whatever point, teachers and the education system being a particularly strategic point; will result in an upward cycle of more kind and caring actions throughout society, a domino effect, first carried out and taught by the teachers, then reflected by their students who in turn go out to make a caring and loving society, which teaches by actions the loving and caring attitude and life perspective it learned in school. No matter what profession or trade these students go into, they will effectively be acting as teachers. This will imprint upon their generation and upcoming generations. Furthermore, among each cohort there will be those who go into the formal education system as teachers, who repeat the process. Even if the world around us is not loving and caring today, if we interject this element of love and care for our teachers, also providing for their use, a curriculum which teaches to their students this love and care for others, the effect will ripple throughout the surrounding layers and sectors of society, and on into the future ones.

Theoretical underpinnings

Social constructivist theory is the lens through which we observe the learning curve of not only each case study's education system, but also the whole society around it. Critical education and social education theories also have bearing. The first addresses the need for education as a tool of transformation in society to effect justice and equality (Mellor, 2013). The second refers to the need for ethics-filled social studies curricula to reach beyond mere book learning and imbue the school atmosphere, reflect in the school staff, and extend into every sector of society, for it to imprint upon the lives of the students (Giroux & Penna, 1979).

Research methodology

Mixed method qualitative and quantitative is employed. Qualitative research draws on secondary data in the form of a literature review of two case studies: Singapore and Finland. Aside from this, articles on social psychology are cited which support the rationale behind interventions highlighted in the studies. Quantitative data from the educational systems of both case study countries informs the analysis. The cases were chosen for their relevance to the research theme, making them key cases also holding value for their universality. The developing world has great need of trained teachers as recognized in UN SDG 4.

Good teachers, a common needed denominator

Throughout history, we can follow trends and schools of thought on how to teach effectively: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Rome, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Renaissance, Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, Horace Mann, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Paolo Freire... and this limited list mentions only people, places, or times from the Western world. In each context, a common thread was the need for inspired teachers, motivated to teach, who could inspire and motivate their students to even surpass them. What helped the teachers to become good teachers? In this paper, we explore several aspects of teachers' needs and possible ways to

satisfy those needs, in order to help teachers achieve their maximum performance. We will examine:

1. Inspiration and motivation;
2. Compensation and stability;
3. Preparation and ongoing development;
4. Recognition and advancement.

These four domains fit within Abraham Maslow's pyramidal taxonomy of human needs, compensation corresponding to physiological needs, and stability (as in job stability), also relating to safety.

There are at least five sets of goals which we may call basic needs. These are briefly physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. In addition, we are motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions upon which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain more intellectual desires. (Maslow, 2000, p. 3)

Inspiration and motivation

Vision to see ahead and realize that what one does today will contribute to a better tomorrow drives some people to accomplishment. This corresponds to some of the higher levels of Maslow's pyramid of human psychological development. Conferences, networks, and support groups, can help to maintain that vision. When teachers see that their work can contribute to making a better society, they find motivation.

Preparation and ongoing development

In order to put vision and ideals into practice, teachers need good job preparation. The foundation for a teacher's preparation is usually found in their teachers' university training (normal university), but it cannot stop there, or the teacher will be left behind by the ever advancing new trends and technology of the education profession. A contributing factor to motivation is confidence. Andrew Elliot and Carol Dweck report:

A motivational analysis of competence must account for the ways in which individuals' behavior is energized... and directed... that competence is an inherent psychological need of the human being. (Elliot & Dweck, 2005)

They go on to explain that competence-based motivation produces joy, pride, and self-esteem. When a person feels incompetent, motivation can take a drastic dive exhibited in sadness, shame, and anxiety.

Compensation and job stability

Teachers, like all other citizens of society, have material needs for both themselves and their families. If the teachers' job is poorly paid, they will be fighting an uphill battle, become discouraged and seek other, better paid professions. Closely linked to compensation is job stability. Some countries provide both a high compensation and great job stability for their teachers, the result being a highly effective teaching force and top ratings in PISA or other measuring instruments of educational system effectiveness (Sclafani, 2015, p. 1; Sahlberg, 2011, as cited in

Kager, 2013, p. 77). When teachers' salaries and school funding are dependent upon standardized test scores it is easy for a "teach to the test" mentality to set in. Sahlberg, one of the main engineers of the highly successful Finnish education reform, proposed that testing should be a part of the education process, but not affect teachers' salaries or school funding (Sahlberg, 2011, as cited in Kager, 2013, p. 77).

Compensation, although at a lower level on Maslow's pyramid of human needs, directly affects the higher level of inspiration, idealism, and altruism. Maslow explains:

These basic goals are related to each other, being arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency. This means that the most prepotent goal will monopolize consciousness... but when a need is fairly well satisfied, the next prepotent ("higher") need emerges, in turn to dominate the conscious life and to serve as the center of organization of behavior... (Maslow, 2000, p. 3)

If a teacher is poorly paid and cannot meet the needs of his or her family, those concerns will interfere with whatever idealism the teacher might have in teaching the students.

Recognition and advancement

Everyone needs to be recognized as a valuable part of his or her society, as illustrated in Maslow's pyramid, and in these examples:

Singapore

Singapore and Finland are prime examples of teachers being highly valued, but this recognition goes beyond words. In Singapore, teachers are among the highest paid professionals. The teaching job is so highly esteemed, even coveted, that it is difficult to enter the normal university and once the training is finished, because the job is one of the most highly paid, it is also highly respected. Opportunities for advancement are built into the system, so the job is not a stagnant or boring occupation. The result is a high level of education for Singapore.

The quality of the teaching profession is the focus and result of the coherent, systemic education policy in Singapore. (It is) continually improving its policies for preparing, hiring, evaluating, compensating, mentoring, developing, and retaining its teachers. (Sclafani, 2015, p. 1)

Since its independence in 1965, the average education level has risen from 3rd grade to a required minimum of 10 years of studies in 2015, catapulting it to the top rankings of global education (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015, as cited in Sclafani, 2015, p. 1). According to a 2004 Singapore survey, the job of the teacher was considered more important than that of doctors or lawyers, as far as its contribution to society (Shanmugaratnam, 2005, as cited in Sclafani, 2015, p. 1).

Finland

Finland also scores at the highest international level in education. In Finland, the teaching profession is highly regarded in society and thus entry into the profession is very demanding and competitive. Finnish teachers are trusted with a fair degree of professional autonomy, carrying the responsibility of local curriculum development. At the same time, they participate in a professional learning community of

colleagues to analyze and improve curricula. The combination of local school control and teachers' responsibility for interpreting and applying the national curriculum in a flexible way, allows for an effective customization of teaching and learning locally (Sahlberg, 2011, as cited in Kager, 2013, p. 77).

More than schooling, caring for people

Finland has invested heavily in education: monetarily and legislatively. The country went from an agrarian economy to an industrial, to becoming a knowledge economy, with a highly educated population, enjoying a high quality of life in a harmonious society. The combination of a caring government, respect for private enterprise and the individual resulted in a strong teamwork which could make the best use of its assets, people always being the most important consideration (Jantti & Vartiainen, 2009).

Key factors in the country's trajectory have been:

- Strong emphasis on education;
- Emphasis on comprehensiveness and equality in education, regardless of age, financial status, locality of residence, sex, mother tongue;
- Long term investment, not expecting or requiring quick results;
- Considering competent teachers as the "starting point" for an effective education system;
- Strong central national guidance, yet respect for each locality's and school's autonomy;
- Flexible education which adapts quickly to the ever-changing needs of society.

All education in Finland is free, from pre-school to university, even doctoral levels. The quality of education is also uniform from area to area, city to city, neighborhood to neighborhood, enforced and supported by the local government of each area (Finnish National Board of Education, as cited in Gross-Loh, 2014). Krista Kiuru, Finland's Minister of Education has said: "Equal means that we support everyone and we're not going to waste anyone's skills" (Kiuru, 2014, p. 1). Teachers are instructed to give equal attention to students, but to particularly support those who need more help. This helps them to be sure that they can develop everyone's talents and potential, without overlooking anyone. Teachers also give instruction in many skills besides academics in order to offer a well-rounded education of life experience. Kids should learn the meaning of life, community skills, learn that they are needed, develop a good self-image, and know that it matters to take care of others (Kiuru, 2014, p. 2).

According to Hanele Cantell from the Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, teachers are the ones trusted to assess the students in school, rather than a national uniform test. She also said that the country considers teachers to be the best experts for curriculum design, since they are the ones in daily contact with the students in the classroom and can see what is working and what isn't. Curriculum is not handed down from some disconnected ministry office (Cantell, 2016, p. 1).

Students' needs

Students need, in some sense, the same things as teachers so that they also can give their best performance. If they are not treated as participants in the learning process, but simply talked down to by dissatisfied, disgruntled teachers in overburdened facilities, they will produce similar results.

Human beings avoid being a nothing (rather than a something), a ludicrous figure regulated by others, being manipulated, unappreciated, given orders... an interchangeable man. (Maslow, 2000, p. 55)

School of life not limited to the classroom

If respect, care, and appreciation are shown to our students, they will be empowered to return it to society, but society must be an example of the ethics taught in the classroom, or if not, the classroom knowledge about ethics and morals becomes fictitious, even ludicrous and unbelievable.

*What excellence is this that manages to coexist with more than a billion inhabitants of the developing world who live in poverty, not to say misery? Not to mention the all but indifference with which it coexists with 'pockets of poverty' and misery in its own, developed body. (Paolo Freire, 1994, *Pedagogy of Hope*, as cited in Darder, 2002, p. 1)*

In a presentation at the World Forum for Comparative Education in Beijing, Professor Vinayagum Chinapah, long time UNESCO advisor and Chair of the Institute of International Education, Stockholm University, emphasized that to produce such a result as excellence and equity in education and society, education alone cannot solve a society's problems, but it must work hand in hand with social action. If not, education will be sterile in its effectiveness, serving merely as a rubber stamp of approval for the status quo rather than an agent of change and social progress (Chinapah, 2017). Curricula which provide students with opportunities to experience charitable social action are foundational to positive life education.

Critical evaluation

Singapore in 1965 had a 3rd grade average education level. Priority was put on education and teacher preparation. Teachers became respected, and highly paid. Today, Singapore's education level is one of the highest. Prioritization on education has helped to transform this renowned country.

Finland developed from primitive agrarian to an industrial and currently to a knowledge economy, highly valuing each citizen, as reflected in its educational, economic and political systems; social education in its truest sense: caring action, a model to replicate.

Conclusion

Teachers and their care is a strategic fulcrum, or turning point, which can be leveraged in a society to lift it toward meaningful progress. If teachers are cared for and trusted, they will respond by passing this treatment on to their students, empowering them to pass it on to the world. Meanwhile, however, those students are also in the school of real life around them, and so it behooves our societies to

embody those same good values taught, hopefully, in the school buildings. If both “schools” work together toward this goal of making an excellent and equitable world, together with our children, we will reach our goal.

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